Population trends and the family

Powerful demographic and socio-economic forces at work all over the world are reshaping the structure of the family. Populations and families are ageing; households are changing in size and composition; people are getting married and having children later in life; the impact of women's longer life expectancy is increasingly felt. Such shifts—and many others—will have far-reaching consequences for social security systems, national economies and societies as a whole.

Fertility and age distribution

The world's varied demographic make-up deeply influences family structure. In regions where young populations prevail, overall demographic growth will continue, increasing the demand for education, jobs and social services. At the other end of the spectrum, ageing populations will test the limits of pension and health schemes.

In some regions, including Africa and much of southern and western Asia, fertility levels are still high. There, the age structure, which was already very young in 1950, has become even younger, due to lower infant and child mortality rates and no decline in fertility. Now children under age 15 constitute nearly half of the population in those regions.

In countries where significant fertility decline started after 1950, the age structure became older in the 1970s and 1980s. The turning point was around 1970, when fertility had declined substantially in many countries of Latin America and eastern and southeastern Asia.

In countries where significant fertility decline started before 1950, population ageing has continued. Now 12 per cent of the population in those nations, consisting mostly of industrial countries, is aged 65 and over.

The ageing of populations and families

The projected increase of the world's elderly population will be substantial: in 1990 there were some 328 million people aged 65 years and over; the projected number for 2025 is 828 million, or more than 2.5 times that of 1990.

The ageing of populations is due to two main factors: improvements in health care, leading to higher life expectancy, and change in the aspirations and behaviour of individuals, leading to drops in fertility.

The greying of populations will be felt especially in the industrial countries, where the proportion of over-65s is expected to increase to 16 per cent of the total by the end of the century. This will raise crucial questions of housing, insurance, health care and welfare arrangements for the elderly.

How best to provide for a growing population of ageing persons has become a political issue in many countries. In the United States, for instance, the percentage of the elderly in the population has tripled in this century. In Japan, the proportion of older people will be 16.7 per cent by the end of the century—more than double the 1975 figure of 8 per cent.

Another consequence of the ageing of populations has been the decrease in the ratio of the working population to dependent (young and elderly) populations. As a result, a relatively small number of working people have to support both the younger and the older generations. Public support mechanisms are often needed to help working people cope with this double commitment.

The length of widowhood has increased, because the increase in men's life expectancy has lagged behind that of women, and because of men's higher age at marriage. This has left women economically vulnerable in many countries. Most women, because of their child-related responsibilities and their employment in the informal sector or in low-paid jobs, are economically dependent on their husbands or other male relatives throughout their lives. They thus have less chance of becoming eligible for pensions.

In addition, many women outlive their husbands and spend their last years without that support. Moreover, more elderly women are left on their own during

their last years, as the number of children continues to decrease and families continue to split due to migration and urbanization. This situation requires public support measures in favour of elderly women.

Changes in household size

In industrial countries, low birth rates have declined further, to replacement level and below; and in many developing countries, especially in Asia and Latin America, the process of rapid decline in birth rates has started. One of the results has been the diminishing size of households.

In all industrial countries except the former Soviet Union, the average household size shrank during the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, the average United States household continued to shrink, from 3.1 persons in 1970 to 2.6 in 1990. This trend also characterizes most countries in Latin America and eastern Asia. China's average household declined from 4.4 persons in 1982 to 4 in 1990.

On the other hand, in countries in Africa and southern and western Asia, the average household size seems to have increased. In Algeria, for instance, it went from 5.9 persons in 1966 to 7 in 1987. In Pakistan it increased from 5.7 persons in 1968 to 6.7 in 1981. All countries in western Asia (except Israel and Turkey) have reported increases, largely due to declines in child mortality rates and increases in life expectancy.

At the other end of the spectrum, the number of one-person households has increased remarkably in industrial countries, with growing numbers of young unmarried people or elderly people living alone. The increase is not limited to the industrial world; there is a growing trend towards one-person households in developing countries, although the proportion is still relatively small. This trend is found more often in developing countries on their way to modernization.

The composition of households also varies among developing regions. In most African countries, households (having an average of 5-6 members) are equally divided between children and adults. In most of Latin America, the mean number of adults in a household in the 1980s was close to three members, and was higher than the mean number of children. In Asia, most families have on the average three or more adults, and the mean number of children is always lower than that of adults.

Delaying marriage and child-bearing

The mean age at marriage has risen all over the world. In the industrial countries, since the late 1960s, marriage and family formation have been considerably delayed. The mean age at marriage has also risen significantly in the developing world. Data confirm the rise in almost all industrial and developing countries between 1960 and 1970, and even more so between 1970 and 1990.

In developing countries, a major factor has been the notable increase in female education. People also tend to postpone marriage in times of economic depression *and* in times of economic prosperity, because of their desire to gain work experience and become established before starting a family. Another reason is the scarcity of housing, especially in large cities.

In many regions, women also tend to have children later in life. This is especially true in western Europe, where the average age at which women have their first child has risen sharply and now tends to be about 29 years. In addition, more and more couples are choosing to remain childless.

Changes in forms of family association

In countries that have experienced negative population growth for some time, there has been an increase in new forms of family association, such as reorganized families, consensual unions and single-parent households. A similar trend might take place among urban populations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where a rapid decline in fertility rates has already occurred.

In central and eastern Europe, the rapid shift to the behavioural systems of market-oriented societies might introduce the same changes in forms of family association, but perhaps with severe effects, creating the possibility that feelings of responsibility for the disadvantaged might weaken.

These developments have important consequences for the provision of security and welfare support for dependants, particularly children, the elderly, disabled persons and the chronically ill. This is especially true in countries where the family and the community are still the main means of providing individual security.

Social security policies

Demographic changes greatly affect the provision of social security. In many countries, the family continues to constitute an effective response to the inadequate social security provided by the State and the market. But many such informal security systems have been greatly damaged by recent social changes.

Formal social security programmes, both public and private, have also suffered substantially. There has been insufficient development of other mechanisms provided by the market or by new forms of association. The result is a wide gap in the provision of social security, with many people trapped in poverty and destitution.

Innovative approaches, particularly credit and savings cooperatives, will be necessary because many potential beneficiaries are at the fringes of the formal economy. The present is an ideal time for expanding formal social security: in many countries there is only a small—though rapidly growing—proportion of pension recipients relative to contributors.

In industrial countries, the alternative seems to be either a longer working life or a lower than accustomed—or lower than expected—standard of living. Difficult political choices will be necessary.

In central and eastern Europe, economic and social turmoil has had extremely serious consequences for large segments of the population, particularly the elderly. The reconstruction of the social security system will be difficult, but essential if severe problems are to be solved. Rather than being a burden, effective social security measures provide a major means of achieving the social stability those countries need for economic reconstruction.

Policy implications

To provide effective support for all families, when formulating social policies, Governments should take into account the many changes in family formation, structure and functions. Among other things:

- Careful attention should be given to achieving close coordination between population policies and social policies;
- Long-term planning should anticipate the changing needs over time of the young, the elderly and the working-age population, to ensure that adequate resources are available when and where needed;
- In allocating public and private resources, "intergenerational equity" should be practised, with an appropriate combination of public, community-based and family support programmes for the different generations.

This article is based mainly on the following United Nations sources: United Nations Commission for Social Development, "Social Consequences of Population Growth and Changing Social Conditions, with Particular Emphasis on the Family", Report of an Expert Group Meeting, E/CN.5/1993/6; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe/United Nations Population Fund, *Changing Population Age Structures 1990-2015. Demographic and Economic Consequences and Implications,* United Nations, Geneva, 1992; United Nations Population Fund, *The State of World Population 1992,* New York, 1992.

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